# Beyond the Armchair: Defying the Myth of 1950s Fatherhood From Outside of the Household

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A strong, well-balanced family doesn't always have to be driven by an equally strong and well-balanced father. However, the all too recognizable idealization of the media-perfected, ever-present, firm-but-fair father of the 1950s continues to resonate with us even after 70 years of his evolution and progressive change. It is assumed that he governs the household with a stern, yet not iron fist, he comes home after a long day of honest work with poise, and he cares for his wife and kids with an equal reserve—not affectionate but not cruel. The father is supposed to be the rock of the 1950s home, and he does this in the way in which society believes he should. In Taylor Sheridan's *Hell or High Water*, divorced father and disconnected brother Toby Howard provides none of these characteristics for his family, and it would be impossible for him to follow this mythological lead. Unlike the traditional '50s father figure, Toby robs banks with his ex-con brother, Tanner, in an attempt to save his recently deceased mother's ranch to secure a prosperous future for his children. Yet despite his deviation from what cultural tradition demands, Toby does for his family what a father of that era would never think to do: provide for his family even in separation, maintain his loyalty to his brother even after his tumultuous past, and remain a father figure to his sons despite the unorthodox model he presents. Through his endeavors, Toby breaks the mold of the nuclear father that the nuclear family demands by displaying how a father can be just as virtuous, admirable, and worthy of reverence by not taking on this memorable role. Instead, Toby defines this role through what he is willing to do in pursuit of supporting his family, his commitment to his brother despite his turbulent history, and the position as a role model he is able to maintain despite the immoral actions that accompany his mission.

The classic, idealized, and often too fondly remembered father of the 1950s is a mythological standard that cannot be lived up to through the same historical markers that defined his significance. Like that of *Leave it to Beaver* or *Father Knows Best*, the fathers of the post-war era often came home to, or at least were meant to come home to the excitement of the return of the family's natural leader, who after his white-collar workday took his position at the armchair to watch his favorite television show, read the paper, or smoke his pipe. This day at work may have consisted of a 9-5 office job in which a college degree was likely mandatory—one that was achieved through the GI Bill of a previous decade and possibly after serving in the Second World War. His allegiance to his wife has held strong for longer than most men of previous times, as he may have begun this relationship in high school, made it official in a young marriage, and continues to uphold his faith after more than a decade, as divorce was heavily frowned upon at the time. Although he may only be able to discuss sports or politics with his children who he otherwise would remain largely detached from, he is still ever-present in their lives despite his relative distance. And through all of this, he provides for his family in the traditional way in which the culture of the time dictated, never wavering from this upheld standard. In contrast with Toby, he fulfills the role that a father was traditionally and societally built up to provide, whether or not this idealistic standard was one of legend.

Family is something a father performs daring, selfless, and even potentially self-sacrificing actions for, regardless of their ethical value. Unlike the typical 50s father, Toby's breadwinning ability is not upheld by an earnest day's pay of office work or manual labor, and instead, is fulfilled by robbing banks throughout the West Texas area with his brother. In the name of providing for his sons' future, he gets shot at by trigger happy town folk, buries getaway cars under the property of his mother's soon-to-be foreclosed ranch, purifies the money made

from each nearly escaped felony at casinos, and uses portions of the loose cash to fuel successive robberies in the next town over.

In contrast with any other common criminal, Toby never uses the money he earns through robbery on himself, which is displayed by his final, long, and anticlimactic drive back to the casino to "clean" the stolen money in another dilapidated 1980s style car. At the culmination of the film in which Toby has his first interaction with Sheriff Hamilton, the Texas Ranger who put an end to the robberies by killing his brother Tanner, he summarizes the essence of his efforts, humbly reminiscing: "I've been poor my whole life. My parents, their parents before them. It's like a disease, passing from generation to generation. It becomes a sickness--that's what it is. It affects every person you know. But not my boys. Not anymore" (Sheridan, *Hell or High Water* 1:33:58-1:34:24). After subsequent dialogue builds to the anticipation of a final shootout, Toby's ex-wife and kids pull into the driveway, get out of the car to meet Sheriff Hamilton, and stop the impending violence. In confusedly learning that Toby doesn't even live in the ranch house he recently gained through his escapades, Ranger Hamilton perfectly surmises, "The things we do for our kids, huh?" (Sheridan, *Hell or High Water* 1:35:53). In ending the film, Ranger Hamilton's realization of Toby's servitude to his children reveals how his despicable actions were solely family-oriented, defying his notion that it was all in the name of petty thievery and shallow, exorbitant spending.

Through his rival's realization, it is clearly made known that Toby's intentions never wavered in the face of adversity, and despite the peril and violence he underwent, it was all with the purpose of providing for his family and nothing more. While Toby radically deviates from the traditional way in which a father of post-war era would have supported his family, his intent was equal to, if not greater than his exemplars, as they would never consider committing crime in

pursuit of providing their families a greater life. Although Toby demonstrates this deviation from the mythically standardized nuclear father through the way in which he provides for his family, through his bond with his brother he also defies the culturally infused, 1950s notion that the essence of family is exclusive to one's wife and children.

Familial bonds, regardless of the relationship they encapsulate, don't always have to be broken by one-sided imperfection or the negativity of the past. Unlike what was subliminally inspired by 1950s media and television culture, Toby maintains his allegiance to his brother despite his short fuse, his hair trigger for violence, and his extensive criminal history. The era in which the nostalgia for the nuclear family's stability and simplicity was crafted subsequently excluded the involvement of other family members, emphasizing the still largely upheld importance of the unity of the husband, wife, two kids, and occasional dog. At the time, even tending to family members as close and integral as one's parents was shied away from, as in her excerpt *What We Really Miss About the 1950s,* author Stephanie Coontz relays, "Young couples moved away from parents and kin, cutting ties with traditional extrafamilial networks that might compete for their attention" (Colombo et al., 2019). She also describes within her work how psychiatrists like Edward Strecker and sociologist Talcott Parsons warned that contemporary families may be straying from this unbreakable norm if they felt they should remain in their parents' lives, as "One sign that you might be that dreaded [son or daughter]...was if you felt you should take your aging parents into your own home, rather than putting them in 'a good institution … where they will receive adequate care and comfort'" (Colombo et al., 2019). However, unlike what was pushed for at the time, Toby defies the notion that abandoning those who are outside of the exclusivity of the nuclear family is acceptable, as he is willing to defend his loyalty to his brother to the extent of engaging in violence and crime.

Earlier in the film, Toby and Tanner paused at a gas station en route to the Oklahoma casino in which they "clean" their stolen money. While Toby is inside grabbing Tanner a drink, two 20-something-year-old kids pulled up on the opposite pump in a bright green Dodge Charger, obnoxiously blasting Death Metal music. As they stopped, Tanner was looking lazily out of the window directly in their direction, inciting the aggression of the driver, who eventually pulled out a gun and threatened him. As he walked out of the gas station store, Toby saw the kid and immediately ran up to him, slammed his head on the door, threw him to the ground, and landed consecutive punches afterward. Toby also remembered to throw the gun away, which received a word of approval from his brother: "Oh you remembered the gun! You're getting to be an old hat at this!" (Sheridan, Hell or High Water 34:15-34:20) to which he replies, "[That] asshole could've killed you" (Sheridan, Hell or High Water 34:30). As they drove away from the gas station, Tanner complained that Toby got him a Mr. Pibb instead of a Dr. Pepper—what he originally asked for at the start of the scene, saying, "Only assholes drink Mr. Pibb," to which Toby replies, "Drink up" (Sheridan Hell or High Water 34:47-34:50). As it is violently displayed in this interaction, Toby doesn't relinquish his ties to his brother despite Tanner's impulsivity and will with which he enjoys initiating confrontation, and as a result, adding to his criminal rap sheet. However, what further signifies this allegiance, although at times it may be difficult for him to maintain, is Toby's response to his brother's complaints, which demonstrate how regardless of Tanner's multitude of faults and character flaws, his perseverant loyalty remains steadfast—a facet of the postwar era that would have been unrecognizable in its climate and time. In addition to his unwavering faith toward his trouble-hungry, ex-convict brother, Toby defies another characteristic of the nostalgia-inducing 1950s era—the prototypical role model that a father must be to his children.

A father's errors and faults can serve as just an effective model to his children as his triumphs and achievements. However, while they may be honorable, the importance is in his faults, as those are the pieces of his character that his children must truly strive to overcome. While the media of the time may have emboldened the father to be the steadfast guide of the family and a perfect role model to his children, this was another facet of the timely propensity for myth. However, there were exceptions to this rule, one being Paula, the transgender woman pictured by Mariette Pathy Allen in an excerpt from *Reading Images of American Families.* Unlike a majority of the men of her time, Paula supports this necessity of leading by an alternative example, whether or not that example corresponded to what was dictated as societally correct by the current culture. It can be immediately seen the way in which Paula breaks the mold of the '50s father, who displays how a man can transform into a woman--a radical deviation from the gender-based norms of the era, as well as how one's mother may not always be the object of makeup, dresses, and hairdos. Through openly presenting her culturally driven fault (transforming into a woman from a man) to her daughter, Paula displays how societal norms can be pushed and broken--guidance that would not have had the same weight if her mother were the one donning the makeup. Likewise, Toby breaks this perennial post-war model from which fathers base their merit today, as his criminal tendencies serve to show his children a path to abstain from, just as Paula demonstrates to her daughter how she should avoid the entrapment of stereotypical gender roles.

When seeing his family for the first time in years, Toby sits down with his eldest son in the collapsing backyard of his ex-wife's house to catch up on the slowly fading 5 or some years he's since missed, handing him a beer. After telling him of his deceased grandmother and the ranch he will soon inherit, Toby instructs, "Now, you may be hearing a lot of things about me

and your uncle. Don't be like us, you hear me?" His son then immediately replies, "Whatever I hear, I won't believe," to which Toby shoots back, "No, you believe it. I did all of it. Now, you, you do different." After a moment passes, Toby asks, "Ain't gonna drink it?" in reference to the beer. His son replies, "You tell me not to be like you and then you offer me a beer? Which is it?" to which Toby plainly states shortly after, "Good boy" (Sheridan, *Hell or High Water* 54:42-55:53). Through this short exchange Toby demonstrates that although he may not possess the markings of the ever-honorable 1950s father, he still serves as a role model in the way in which he demands his children not to follow in his shortcomings. Despite lacking the triumphs that a father may be honored in passing on to his children, and instead, being entirely defined by traits that are unworthy of imitation, Toby's cautionary warning he imparts to his son outdoes the postwar model, as it breaks the mold of the concept that the father must lead by positive example to be worthy of respect and admiration.

Although it is often imprinted on both old and new fathers alike to believe otherwise, the fathers of the 1950s were a force to be remembered, but not idolized or mythicized as they often are today. They may have been built up to be pipe smoking, paper reading, all knowing leaders of the suburban household, but this was often a gross portrayal by the media and television—not reality. In reality, the father that should be followed and emulated is not one that is distant, white collared, well-to-do, or like one of myth, but like Toby Howard, and what defines his position within this traditionally unbroken role. However, this emulation should never amount to robbing banks, driving stolen getaway cars, or being shot on the poverty stricken plains of West Texas, but rather through enduring sacrifice in the name of one's family, remaining by the side of family members who would otherwise be abandoned were it not for this unrelenting bond, and portraying a model for one's children, even if it is a model worthy of conquering through change.

The modern fathers of today should strive to be like Toby, as his emulation will provide more for the sake and well-being of the family than looking stoically on from the comfort of the armchair.

## References

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